

Intentional Obscurities by QuiteQuirky21

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Summary:

A look into the mind of Jonathan Byers, a month after his brother's return from the Upside Down.

1. Developer

Author's Note:

It's very simple; I love Jonathan Byers. I wrote a little something just to expound upon some of my thoughts about him, and it turned out to be surprisingly decent. I suspect I will continue to write this for my own gratification, and if it continues to be decent then I will continue to post it here.

(Please excuse me if there are any typos, this was all written in one sitting and was very minimally proofread.)

The house smelled like gingerbread cookies. Mr. Wheeler sat comfortably, reclined in his lazy boy, watching TV. A radio playing Christmas tunes was somewhere down the hall, probably in the kitchen. It was some time after nine o'clock at night, but not by too much.

Jonathan didn't have to ask where the boys were, he knew. That and they were shouting in excitement. He walked down the stairs to retrieve his younger brother. The person he cared about more than anything else in the whole world.

He never said anything about it, he didn't want sympathy or pity, but quite often Jonathan would panic when he couldn't find Will, even if it was for a few seconds. If he rounded a corner expecting Will to be seated in his line of sight, and then did not see him, his chest would constrict faster than glass shatters. It was irrational, and he knew that, but it was his response nonetheless. Sometimes he supposed to himself that it wasn't completely irrational, though, given how lacking in rationality their lives had become.

Will, of course, was right there, only momentarily hidden behind a wooden post of the stairs.

He marveled at the boys in front of him as he reached the bottom of the steps. Playing the same game with the same zeal, only a month

later. Perhaps it was the fact that none of them went through it alone, or that none of them had recovered alone, that made them so resilient. A small pinch in his chest reminded Jonathan that he hadn't gone through it alone either, but he ignored it.

Will parted from his friends as if a month ago they hadn't all thought he was dead, and it boggled Jonathan's mind. They went upstairs, said their goodbyes and well wishes, and almost made it out unscathed.

"Jonathan?" she called out from upstairs.

His heart stuttered along with his step, and he turned reluctantly towards the carpeted stairs he had deliberately not looked up. She bounced down the steps, filled with a youth that he felt he had never been granted.

The gift was so perfectly wrapped he almost didn't want to touch it. A very small part of him, that grew larger by the day, resented the fact that people had put so much effort into turning everything back to normal. School was normal, work was normal, Christmas was fucking normal. But it was more than that. It was also who the gift was coming from.

Nancy Wheeler, the closest thing to a friend he'd had in years. She was, in many ways, a lot like the gift. Unassuming, squared off edges, wrapped perfectly in friendly words. She did not have to be opened for someone to understand what she was, because to most her identity was the wrapping paper.

She was a present. Easily recognizable, camouflage folded crisply around her corners, and wrapped in a bow. Jonathan did not know if she had chosen this for herself, or if the wrapping paper had been wrapped and taped around her over time. When one looked at Nancy Wheeler they saw the present, not the camera.

It was a camera. A nicer camera than the one Steve had broken, too. Will didn't think to ask questions, which Jonathan was extremely grateful for. How might that get explained? *I was out searching for you and I heard a scream. Long story short, I took pictures of Nancy as she undressed and her boyfriend smashed my camera.*

His mind wandered to that night more often than he cared to admit. The good news is nobody wanted him to admit it. He still didn't know why he had continued to take pictures, why he hadn't just left as soon as he saw it was a party and not a victim. Though, maybe he had seen a victim of sorts. Maybe it was Barb, victim to her good nature. Maybe it was Chelsea and Tommy, victim to their unfathomable stupidity. Perhaps it had even been Steve, victim to having real feelings for the first time. But most likely it had been Nancy, victim to herself. Her body, young and inexperienced, betrayed her in its wants. Her mind shutting off because her heart was afraid of fear.

Nancy, who was not intrinsically bad for what she had done, had still done it to herself.

Of course, Jonathan felt a stirring of self-loathing in his gut when he thought about why else he might have taken photographs. The intent was never sexual, he was not lying about that. But he would be lying if he said he had no intention of keeping them, to look at sometimes. Her small frame, becoming even smaller without thick clothing or proper lighting, was beautiful in a way he had never seen anything be. It made his heart leap even then, driving home in the car as Will recounted the whole campaign in great detail.

Jonathan mostly reserved taking pictures for inanimate objects, because inanimate objects could not lie. They could not change expressions, or cover up. They could not be anything they were not, and they could only be what they were. That night Nancy did not cover up, and though it may have been new or unusual for her, she was what she was. Purely, and without pretense. In that moment he had envied Steve, for being allowed to see someone like that. To see someone with the ability to hide, and choosing not to.

Hallways had become tunnels, and lights had become flames that would surely lick up the gasoline that could always be smelled right under his nose but too far away to locate. His room had become his safe haven even more than before, which two months ago Jonathan would have said was impossible. Jonathan marveled at how many things he would have called impossible two months ago.

2. Fixer

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonathan Byers continues processing everything and just being adorable.

Nightmares had become more common than dreams in the town of Hawkins, even among those who did not know the truth. The small collection of people who knew anything akin to the real story were now inextricably and permanently linked, but were also just *different*. The eyes that had shifted around Joyce Byers now simply averted completely. Mike, Lucas, and Dustin didn't have an inkling of a problem with bullies anymore. Steve Harrington, still welcome among the ranks of the wealthy and beautiful, had for the most part defected.

It was as if the entire town knew that it was keeping a secret from itself, and absolutely no one wanted to find out what it was.

Had Will actually died, things might have changed. Maybe if Jonathan lost half of his entire remaining family, people would leave him alone. But Will was alive, and so no pity was taken. Or if there was any pity, it was cancelled out by a sharp increase in ridicule. It was always quiet, if not silent, of course. Shared glances as he walked by, whispers at lunch, changing seats if he was too close. He didn't want their pity, he never had. However, he would have appreciated if they could at least be less obvious in their morbid fascination.

Depending on who you asked, or what you asked about, Jonathan Byers could be any amalgamation of things. There were the common ones: fag, perv, freak, loser, creep, weirdo, nobody. But there was more. Somehow, amidst all the cruelty and misinformation, he had endeared himself ever so slightly to more people than would ever admit it. Most guys, for instance, couldn't help but respect the fact that he'd managed to get Steve Harrington's girlfriend in his bed. And some girls, the ones with an affinity for the bad boy type, would size him up in the halls, trying to picture him pummeling Steve into the gravel. And some of the kinder souls, who did exist though their numbers were few, pieced together just how much he was the glue

that kept his mother in tact.

But no one would *ever* admit that Jonathan managed to do something they found impressive. Instead when they spoke of him they only spoke of how he lurked, and that he apparently tried to set his own house on fire. Pyromaniac, lunatic, violent, insane, unstable, pathetic, sick, demented --

Sometimes Jonathan had to remind himself to take deep breaths. He was never able to tell if it was anger or fear that had wrapped around his lungs and pulled taut. He wasn't sure he cared.

A few days after Christmas, he decided to head down to the hardware shop. Lonny's patchwork and a tarp on the outside had served well enough, but he was tired of seeing his mom pretend she wasn't cold.

Walking into town instead of driving in the dead of winter might not have been the smartest move. He found ways to enjoy the bone chilling walk though, like focusing on the complete silence in everything except his boots on the ground. He was five minutes away from the hardware store when he saw Nancy and Steve step out of the theater. Jonathan checked the marquee, not for the showing, but for the... the graffiti. The disgust he felt for Steve Harrington that day was enough to make him feel sick just thinking about it.

It was too late to switch sides of the road without making it obvious that he did not want to see them, so he kept his head down and quickened his pace. Thinking about it then, watching his breath turn into clouds and shoving his hands further into his pockets, he did not know why he didn't want to see them. At least not together. Separately he could handle them, if he had to.

"Hey, Jonathan," Steve stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

Jonathan ignored his instinctual response of shoving him off and into the box office, and mustered a, "Hey," while looking at the top button on Steve's shirt. Steve took his hand away.

"You have a nice Christmas?" He was trying to be friendly. *Why was he trying to be friendly?*

“Yeah, yeah.” He made a split second of eye contact with each of them. “What, uh, what about you guys?”

“Ours was good, too, yeah,” Steve answered for both of them. “Listen, I want to say -”

“It's fine,” Jonathan interrupted. He didn't know what Steve was going to say, but ‘it's fine’ would be applicable for whatever it was. He expected that to be the end of it, but Steve persevered.

“No man, it's not fine. I was an asshole, and I'm sorry.”

That's when Jonathan made the unfortunate mistake of making eye contact with him. The guilt in his eyes was genuine, riddled with fragments of shame and fear like the lighter brown flecks in his irises.

Jonathan tried to select a response, but his mouth flooded with too many to sort through. He broke eye contact with Steve long enough to flick his gaze over to Nancy, and her expression puzzled him further. She seemed sad. A deep, penetrative sadness that no wrapping paper could hide from Jonathan, because he had felt it, too.

“Thanks for the camera,” he said quietly to both of them, gave them a small nod, and turned around to finish his walk to the hardware store.

He reached the glass doors of the shop with frozen digits and a split lip, but was unfazed by any discomfort. In the few minutes it took to arrive, he had replayed the conversation a few hundred times. The hand on his shoulder, still carrying the fake butter they put on the popcorn. The way Steve clearly meant his words, but it almost felt as if Nancy was shaping them mid-air, making them just right. How her nose in the cold was the same red as her neck on her left side, where Steve had clearly just gone on vacation.

Nancy had kissed him on Christmas Eve. He almost tried to forget about it, because really the best thing to do was try to forget about all of it. The monster, the hunting, Nancy, the Upside Down, finding Will's body in the lake, Nancy Wheeler, picking out a coffin for his dead little brother, sleeping in the same bed as Nancy Wheeler, driving up to see the scum that was his father, getting kissed on the

cheek by Nancy Wheeler. None of it was worth remembering. All it was ever going to do was hurt.

Jonathan knew that she had clearly felt something, too. He also knew that how she felt when she thought she was about to die had absolutely no impact on the present. Impact, like Jonathan's boots crunching down on the thin layer of snow beginning to collect on sidewalks. Impact would be obvious. There would be a print. There were no snowy footprints in her gaze.

He forced himself to stop thinking about it by reading every single label of every single thing he thought he *might* need to stop Will from having a blue tint to his lips. As much as he wished it didn't bother him, Jonathan could barely look at Will if he was anything but his rosy-cheeked self. He couldn't stand it, imagining him hiding and wasting away. So he looked at spackle and mesh and caulking and drywall and bricks and everything that could conceivably be part of a wall.

The door jingled every time someone went in or out, coupled with a welcome or farewell from the man behind the counter. But as the snow began to gather, the store began to clear out. It was for that reason, that Jonathan was surprised to hear the man say welcome once he had been the only customer in the store for at least ten minutes. Though he knew he should be on his way, too, there was something appealing about getting trapped in the snow. Jonathan had begun to concern himself with how favorably he viewed death.

"Jonathan," someone called from the end of the aisle. He tore his eyes away from the ingredients of the putty in his hands, only to see Nancy Wheeler looking at him.

"Oh, hi Nancy." Without thinking about it, he put the jar behind his back. "Why are you here?" It was supposed to sound friendly, conversational, but instead he sounded like she had walked into his room unannounced.

"I," she started sheepishly, walking toward him with small steps, "I thought you might like a ride home"

Jonathan's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I sort of guessed that this is where you were going, with the hole in your wall and all. But the snow started sticking while Steve drove me home, and I saw you walking here -"

"So you're offering to take me home."

She looked at him with wide eyes. She hadn't expected him to speak. She almost never did. "Y-yeah. I mean, if you wanted. If not, I can go."

Jonathan looked at the couple of things he'd actually decided he needed, and figured he could carry it home without too much trouble.

"I'm set, but thanks."

Nancy blinked a few times, nodded, and turned around.

After that Jonathan didn't care if that putty was the best putty, so he threw it in his basket and walked up to buy it all. It was only then, after wandering through aisle after aisle, that he saw how fast the snow was collecting. By the time he got home it would be at least two inches. He saw Nancy, standing outside of her car. She looked like she was thinking. He was thinking too. After a few seconds of watching her, he swallowed his pride.

"I'll be right back," he said to the clerk as he set his things on the counter. He jogged to the door, not wanting to give himself enough time to reconsider.

"Hey Nancy?" Jonathan called out from the doorway of the hardware store. She turned around instantly. "Could I change my mind?"

She gave him a close lipped smile of something akin to relief, and nodded. "Of course."

3. Stop Bath

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonathan and Nancy have a somewhat messy and honest conversation, trying to figure out where they belong in each other's lives.

On the ride back Jonathan's hand bothered him more than it usually did. Why he and Nancy had picked the palm of their hand as a place from which to draw blood was a mystery to him. In all honesty, it was probably as simple as that they'd seen it in movies. The scar in the crease of his hand was pink and puffy, and doctors said it would be months until it turned white. Sometimes Jonathan would grab something too tight, or lean on the corner of a table, and drop it or pull away immediately. The pain was almost completely gone, but it still felt as if the skin could split open at any time.

Nancy didn't notice as her matching scar melted onto the leather of the steering wheel on her way home. Her palms were sweaty and her grip was tight, making for a wince inducing release whenever her hand left the wheel.

Jonathan warmed up in the car on his way home. Nancy didn't make him talk, which he was grateful for. Instead, she watched him out of the corner of her eye and hoped she put on a radio station he liked. It was not absurdly cold, but he was still under dressed. A brown, long sleeve shirt, jeans, and the only jacket she'd ever seen him wear were his only coverings. She questioned to herself absentmindedly how she knew the brown shirt had long sleeves, but she didn't come up with an answer.

There was no need to be subtle about peeking at him, as he had plastered his stare out the middle of his window. Nancy wondered if

he was uncomfortable, if this had been a bad idea. But when she made the turn onto his street, he shifted his eyes to her foot on the gas pedal.

“Thank you Nancy, you didn't have to do this.”

“Drive you home?”

“Any of it,” he said quietly. With a thumping heart, he forced himself to look up at her and give her a quick smile. As soon as the corners of his mouth lowered, so did his gaze, but he considered the venture a success.

She didn't respond as quickly as he thought she would. He assumed, without even realizing the assumption until it was proven incorrect, that she would end the conversation with an obligatory ‘it was no problem’ and then he'd get out of the car and she would drive home. But, she didn't respond as quickly as he thought she would. In fact, after her pause, she pulled the car over and turned it off. Out of shock, Jonathan looked at her again, concerned.

Now it was her turn to look away, resting her head on the steering wheel which she still gripped tightly. Jonathan waited for her to speak, but when she didn't, he found his throat locked. Vibrating vocal chords, in such a small and self contained silence, would have been like starting a lawnmower on their eardrums. So instead, without any other idea to choose from, he cautiously set his hand on her shoulder.

She jumped, and so did he. He pulled his hand away, and she sat

back. Nancy's eyes found his with no trace of fear, only sadness and welling tears.

Jonathan ignored his gut reaction of asking if she was okay, or why she was upset, or what was wrong. He knew the answer to all of those questions, and it was breaking him down, too.

"I know," he whispered, gently taking the small hand that rested by the gear shift into his own. It wasn't as soft as he remembered it being.

Nancy looked down at their hands, perplexed by how foreign it felt. Steve held her hand, it wasn't like she'd never done it before, but something was different. Either in the scenario, the boy, or maybe even herself. When Steve held her hand it was out of affection, but there was also an element of claim. Nancy didn't mind being claimed. It was an incredible boost of self esteem, for someone like Steve to make a point of calling her his. It was the feeling of being wanted that had drawn her to him so quickly, after all.

But Jonathan's calloused palms carried no deeds within them. He did not think or act as though she belonged to anyone but herself. And seemingly, in his hesitant touch and offbeat breathing, it never occurred to him that anything otherwise could be the case. Nancy looked up at Jonathan to see that he was already watching her carefully. They maintained a relaxed eye contact, communicating through the knit of a brow or twitch of a thumb.

"How do you sleep?" Her voice was a broken hush.

Though she didn't say them, Jonathan heard the words that made up the rest of the question. *In that house. How do you sleep in that house?* It was a question Jonathan was afraid of asking himself, because he didn't want to deal with the answer. "I don't, much."

Nancy swallowed and nodded. "I got my nightlight from the basement."

"Lights," Jonathan chuckled breathily and looked away once more, "Are a loaded utility, in my household."

"Are the Christmas -"

"Yeah," Jonathan said, cutting her off and looking at her again. His voice sliced the through the calm air with an anger that caught both of them off guard. His response had not been loud, but the silence of the car and edge of his word had clashed, leaving them both a little rattled.

Nancy pursed her lips slightly and sat back, visibly upset and thoughtful. "And there's still a hole in your wall."

"Yeah."

"How's Will?" She looked at him.

"He's good."

Nancy gave him a sharp look. "How is Will?"

Jonathan blinked, befuddled by the confrontation in her eyes. Then he realized, with a tinge of disgust at the cliché, that he had grown so accustomed to lying that he didn't even notice when he did it to himself. He looked at her for another few moments, and wondered when Nancy had become the person that knew him best.

"He still coughs a lot. They think he might have tuberculosis. When he doesn't know anybody can see him he just stares at nothing. Most nights he has nightmares bad enough that he'll sleep with mom. Sometimes he sleeps with me." The words had been strung together without him even thinking about it. They had already arranged themselves, in hopes of being told to someone.

Nancy's eyes softened briefly, apparently satisfied with his response. Then her brow furrowed and she was once again concerned and inquisitive. "How is she?"

"She's doing well, I think." Jonathan's words got caught in his throat, and he pulled his hand off of hers, trying to free any part of him he could.

"Jonathan, why don't you want to tell me the truth?"

"I am telling you the truth."

“But you don't want to. Why not?”

“Because I was trying to comfort you, not depress you. I know that Barb -” Jonathan cut himself off when the name slipped his tongue. Nancy winced, but didn't say anything. “I know things have been hard.”

Nancy nodded solemnly and looked at the hand in her lap, and the chipped nail polish that adorned its fingernails. She had gotten them painted a soft red for Christmas as incentive for her to stop biting them. It worked for a few days, but by the 26th most of the nails were stubs again.

“Can I come in? I don't really want to go home right now.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, sure.”

Nancy looked him in the eye, gave him a quick smile, and turned the car back on. They drove the rest of the way down the street in silence. She thought about how the crunch of gravel under the tires must feel like coming home to him.

Go inside, set stuff down, Jonathan where were you, hi Nancy, Joyce is like way less mad now bc she wants her son to be happy, Jonathan is fucking cute and makes Nancy wait a second so he can clean up his room

He threw all the boxer shorts and socks strewn about into his laundry

basket, kicked an old pair of sneakers under the bed, pushed his desk chair in, and opened the chemistry textbook collecting dust on the table. It didn't take more than thirty seconds, but it felt like he had kept her waiting an eternity.

“Sorry,” he said as he peeked his head out of the door. Then he realized he could let her in, and instead was standing there with his head jammed between the door and its frame. “Oh, come in.”

Nancy stepped forward cautiously, remembering every square inch of fabric that scrunched beneath her toes. It still smelled faintly of gasoline throughout the hallway. The first thing her eye caught was a movie poster next to the stereo. Second was the stereo. One thing she now knew about Jonathan was that if she ever needed new music to listen to, he was the person to consult. As a family, the Byers obviously didn't have much in excess, but it seemed clear that to Joyce a good sound system for Jonathan was not excess. Nancy agreed.

Next to the shelves the housed the stereo was a metal container that reminded her of a briefcase. Jonathan followed her gaze, and darted across the room to pick it up and explain.

“This is where I keep all my tapes,” he mumbled as he opened it. Nancy raised an eyebrow and glanced at the shelves filled with tapes to her right. “Well, all the ones that don't fit there. Or that I really want to keep safe.”

“Do you have a favorite?” she asked, looking at the collection with interest. She expected another darting response, for him to jump up and retrieve his crown jewel, but there was nothing. She looked back up at him to see that he was examining the contents of the case with

a serious and discerning eye.

“The Clash.” He picked up one of the tapes. “Self titled; their first album.” He looked up and held it out for her to see.

“What kind of music do they make?” Nancy suddenly felt a bit self conscious about her Blondie poster.

“Well, they're a lot of things, I don't know how to describe it.”

“Do you want to listen to it?”

“Do you want to?”

“Yeah, I think I do.”

Jonathan gave her a questioning smile, and stood up to put the album in. Nancy, struck with confidence she wasn't used to, laid down on his bed and waited for the music. When Jonathan stood up and turned around, he went rigid, trying to understand the situation. She didn't help him, only looked at him with a slight smile.

“Do you mind if it's loud?”

“Go for it.”

He hit play, and an upbeat drum began to pulse into the room. He turned around again, obviously hoping that he would now know what to do, but was then equally confused. Nancy closed her eyes and waited for a dip in the bed next to her, trying to open her mind up to the music as best she could.

Longer than she thought he would take had passed, so she opened her eyes slightly to see if he was still standing there. He was not. With a swivel of the head, she saw that he had taken a seat in the chair by the desk. She laughed, and he looked at her. She patted the bed next to her and then closed her eyes again, feeling the bass drum in the pit of her stomach. Or maybe that was just her heartbeat. When she knew to listen for them she could hear his timid footsteps cross the small room. Trepidation and guitars radiated from her right, but the guitars eventually conquered and the springs in the bed groaned under new weight.

Jonathan laid down, stiff as a board, afraid of making any move he shouldn't. In scenarios like this that involved nearly any action, he often opted to sink into the background and do very little. But Nancy wouldn't let him get away with that, just like she hadn't in the car. She didn't ever shine a spotlight on him as he crept offstage, she instead held her hand out for him to return with her to the rim of light.

Nancy could not be sure when one song ended and another began. On principle this annoyed her, but there was a niggling in her gut from her principles being overruled. She took a deep breath, trying to quell the nervous energy coursing through her. Not wanting to think about it too much, Nancy blamed the electric guitar for the pitter patter of her heart. She tried to imagine Jonathan alone, in his room, listening to this album. Her mind flooded with so many questions: Did he sing along? Can he understand what they're saying? How did

he discover them? Why was he alone in his room listening to music when he could have been with her?

Jonathan, unlike Nancy, had little difficulty feeling comfortable with the music. Instead his distress came from the left, and between his ears. He had so many questions for her, and no reason to ask a single one of them. He decided that was for the best, since he would no doubt make some grave mistake and she would never speak to him again.

The air in the bedroom was heavy. The ceiling fan wasn't turned on, the window wasn't open, and the heater down the hall expelled limitless gasps of hot breath. It was not too hot, though. Having a hole in the wall kept things balanced.

It did not chase them. It stalked them. Every step closer was venomous, every breath recycled became poisonous. Steve came back. Why did Steve come back? How could Christmas lights cease to cause a flinch when they flicker? Do people at the movies ever leave because what is entertainment for everyone else is too real?

With sleep weighing down her eyelids and and cocktail of fear and sadness shackling her to her spot, Nancy slowly slipped her fingers onto Jonathan's. At first there was no reaction, but then he enclosed her fingers in his hand. There was no squeeze of reassurance or sigh of relief, instead they slowly and simultaneously melded into the bed and entered a trance of unconscious safety.

When Jonathan next opened his eyes the sun was almost completely gone, and the music had stopped. He blinked his eyes open, but was mystified as he noticed that keeping them open was much easier than he was used to. He had slept well, apparently; the feeling of waking up from a good night's rest was one he did not recognize. Something twitched in his left hand. The previous hours of the day flooded back to him, and he jerked upright, pulling his hand away.

A deep breath was drawn from the other side of the bed. Jonathan felt an inexplicable need to run. As if he had slept in a cave with a hibernating bear, and had to escape before his luck ran out. He stood up from the bed and hit the power button on the stereo as he walked by it to turn the machine off. But there, from the foot of the bed, he caught a glimpse of the bear he was escaping. How pale her skin was in the blue winter light, and how there seemed to be an aura of peace and stillness encasing her. The floor squeaked beneath his anticipatory feet.

Time seemed to freeze along with the icicles hanging off the gutter. The air around him had a chill, but he maintained plenty warm as he stood completely motionless. He took a deep breath, nearly spooking himself with how loud it was compared to the rest of the room. And that's when he realized *why* he liked Nancy as much as he did. Whenever she was around, silence became meaningful. Silence became something to behold, not to be beholden to. For some reason, silence was no longer dangerous when she was with him.

Nancy rolled onto her side, and Jonathan's ears bristled and blushed, so attuned to the slightest of sounds.

You're just watching her now, you should probably stop , Jonathan said to himself. He closed his hand into a fist and took a step toward the door. He stopped again, realizing he had a girl in his room, and that

maybe he shouldn't draw any attention to her being here. He thought to check out his window for his mom's car, and then filled with dread as he remembered that Nancy's car was still parked out front. A groan escaped him as he dropped his head into his hands, feeling quite defeated.

From a few feet away there was a soft squeak, and Jonathan whipped his attention back up to in front of him. The noise had been gentle, but he couldn't tell whether it had been the girl or the bed. After another few seconds Nancy furrowed her brow slightly and squeaked again, a bit louder this time. She then made another quiet sound, almost as if she were pouting. Her breath seemed to quicken.

"Nance?" Jonathan called to her quietly. No response. He walked over and placed his hand gently on her shoulder. She flinched. "Nance?" he said again, a bit louder this time. He knew what nightmares looked like, Will got them often enough, but he wasn't sure how to deal with the fact that it was Nancy in his bed having a nightmare instead of Will. He gave her shoulder a light squeeze, and moved his thumb back and forth. Then, being preceded by the drawing of a very deep breath, her eyes shot open and she recoiled away from him slightly.

"Nance, it's okay, everything's okay."

Her breathing had become rapid and shallow. Her chest plunged up and down as she looked at him, trying to come back from wherever she had just been. As they had before, with nothing but a look they both decided what they were doing. To put words to it would have made it something to talk about.

Jonathan walked around to the other side of the bed and laid down

on his side next to her. Quickly, before he lost the certainty that he was doing the right thing, he sidled up behind her and rested his hand on her shoulder. A deep breath revealed the sweet and clean scent of her hair, and his eyes fluttered shut involuntarily. Suddenly feeling tired again, he decided to let them stay closed, and relaxed into the bed further.

Jonathan woke up what couldn't have been too much later, judging by the sunlight, but felt like he had stepped into an alternate universe. A universe where you ask for coffee with your creamer, the football game was in support of the cheerleaders, and Nancy Wheeler was asleep in his arms. Backwards. Not proven yet to be bad, but certainly backwards.

He exhaled, realizing that he had been holding his breath since he'd opened his eyes. The air ran across Nancy's ear, causing it to twitch and for her to burrow further backwards into him.

A thread that had long ago wrapped around his insides pulled threateningly, reminding him that he *really* shouldn't be doing this. To escape some of the temptation, Jonathan forced himself to turn onto his back and stare at the ceiling. He heaved a large sigh upon feeling how cold the winter air felt against his chest, now that there was nothing there to warm it.

"Jonathan?" Nancy asked quietly from beside him.

She seemed to have something to say, so he didn't ask any of his

million questions. “Yes, Nancy?”

“Do you like me?” Her words were slurred by sleepiness and muffled by her pillow, but there was no mistaking what she had asked.

“I guess I do, Nancy.” Jonathan's stare fixed even tighter on the ceiling. It seemed like he should be panicking or embarrassed, but instead he felt almost nothing. There was no need for him to feel anything, so he didn't. “Is that a problem?”

“Well, I like you, too, Jonathan. So, I guess not.”

“Are you serious?”

At this she finally picked her head up and looked behind her to see Jonathan staring at her with a furrowed brow.

“Yeah, why wouldn't I be serious?”

“Because you're dating Steve?”

“Oh, did you think I meant, like, like-like?” Jesus, they were back in middle school.

Unlike middle school though, this conversation was being had in bed,

not in the back stairs behind the gym. Of course, Jonathan felt a slew of horrid emotions running over and through his whole body. Almost as if he had emotionally pissed himself. But, instead of feeling or dealing with those emotions, he just flopped back down onto his pillow and resumed his ceiling watching.

“Jonathan, I’m so-”

“It’s fine, Nancy, I was being stupid.”

“No, no I should have been more clear, I didn’t -”

“Nancy. I said it’s fine.”

They lay next to each other, staring at the ceiling, for a moment. Nancy hadn’t been told to leave, but she could feel that it might be best. She just wanted to make him feel any bit better, if she could. “You know, there could have been an us.”

“If Steve hadn’t gotten you first, right?”

“...yeah.”

“Well, he did.”

And then the door had shut. Nancy stood up off the bed and left the house silently, except for the rumble of her car coming to life and backing out over the gravel.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am still writing this, it's just extremely slow, so if you care then maybe bookmark this?

Author's Note:

Comments, possibly including suggestions or requests, are of course wildly appreciated, but more than anything I hope you enjoyed this little draft. Thanks for reading!